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# *Guro Masked Performers*

## *Sculpted Bodies Serving Spirits and People*

*Anne-Marie Bouttiaux*  
*translated by Allen F. Roberts*

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**T**here was great commotion at Zuenoula on Saturday, February 13, 1999.<sup>1</sup> The car park was emptied of vehicles, making room for colorful bunting and a shaded platform from which various political figures could harangue the crowd, offer political speeches, and propose catchy slogans. Among these movers and shakers was a “native son,” as people call the Minister of Youth and Culture, the Honorable Faustin Vlami Bi Dou, who hails from Bonon (Bouafle). For Guro, that one of their own should be a government minister is received with a mixture of pride and jealousy: one must see, appreciate, *and* envy the minister’s huge black Mercedes symbolizing his social success, political ascension, and financial power, as well as the gleaming cars of high officials accompanying this dignitary of contemporary life.

The Minister knew that contemplation of his success would not retain the crowd in the suffocating heat of a February day. To make himself appreciated and to offer spectators reason to listen to the long speeches to come, he invited Guro masked performers from villages around Zuenoula. Their promised appearance would persuade people to stay through the aggravations of political discourse. Implicitly, the minister showed his worth to potential voters by promoting performances that were specifically Guro. In such a way, he sought to prove his sincere attachment to his natal region through an entertainment appreciated by villagers, while demonstrating his capacity to invest some of his wealth beyond the bounds of his own extended family. More specifically, his gesture associated the minister with the late president Houphouët Boigny, who had so appreciated the masked Guro dances such as Gyela la Zauli that he regularly asked that they be performed in his honor.<sup>2</sup> The deceased president’s enjoyment of this mask type made it emblematic of a certain “Ivoirity” or Ivoirian national identity,<sup>3</sup> despite the well-known sovereignty of Baule culture at the heart of the Ivoirian state of Houphouët Boigny’s day (Dozon 2000:52).

The masked dancers and the musicians accompanying them waited patiently in the blazing sun so that they could perform as they had been invited (Figs. 1–2). Several rural delegations composed of elder dignitaries in ceremonial dress were also present, recalling that the principles of a specifically Guro political system remained based upon the unavoidable counsel of elders, a sage gerontocracy with values that might be a bit old-fashioned but that were still respected in rural milieux (Fig. 3).



1 Flali mask. Zuenoula, February 13, 1999.

2 Gyela lu Zauli Mask with the sculpture of a politician on the top of the head. Zuenoula, February 13, 1999.

At the end of the speeches, just as the first mask began to dance before the platform (Fig. 4), the minister seemed to decide that he has stayed long enough. He called for his Mercedes, which just missed running into the masker and the musicians, and then the minister and all the political personalities accompanying him headed for their vehicles. These actions were met with consternation. The masked dancers and other artists who had waited for hours to demonstrate their abilities left without further ado. The crowd understood that, faced with an insult of the sort, no performance would occur and so they also left quickly. The associations of maskers had received payment in drinks, food, and travel funds, but the disregard shown their talents was deemed a bitter humiliation for both the delegations and their public who had been so happy to see them. As for the reimbursement, it was considered derisive, for the exercise of power constitutes a real form of pressure, "a position of predation" requiring a maximum of effort for a minimum of investment (Bayart 1989:106).



#### **DONNING MASKS: LOSING FACE IN CONTEMPORARY CÔTE D'IVOIRE**

Through the example of the Guro, I shall explore the daily lives of masked performers in contemporary Ivorian society. There seems to be something profoundly anachronistic in this activity that is still associated with the ritual world of villagers both in public consciousness and in fact. However, masked performance finds itself more and more connected to a form of modernity in the understanding of the performative qualities of those wearing and dancing masks as well as the economic and political implications of such work. Tourism and the Western taste for exoticism have also created enthusiasm for masked performances.

In grand hotels, vacation spots, while visiting home villages in the country, and during folkloric festivals, certain types of Guro masks are seen, generally worn by the same men who perform them in the spiritual realm. This suggests that the person wearing and dancing the masks assumes several identities and roles. A man incorporates the personality of the entity represented by the mask, he plays the roles of artist and comedian, he valorizes the Guro culture to which he belongs, and he is celebrated as a "star" because of his choreographic abilities. Wearing and dancing a mask nowadays refer to an identity complex even as they suggest a new perception of artistry that generates revenue.



(clockwise from top left)  
**3** Guro dignitaries waiting for the masquerades. Zuenoula, February 13, 1999.

**4** Flali mask dancing. Zuenoula, February 13, 1999.

**5** The artistic association of Tibeita. 2002.

PHOTO: ZORO BI IRIÉ

It should be understood that in the Guro language, there is no term to define a mask as an object; instead, it is a living and complete manifestation of a spirit with a defined corporeality, costume, and manner of expression. Some of these spirits invest the bodies of dancers. The sculpted body that the mask can so transform is broken free from ordinary expectations by dance and moulded by masculine aesthetics, choreographic techniques, and the affirmation of an individual whom one can name, admire, and imitate. In the relationships that it maintains with an institutional and social ideal, the dancer's body is a *corps dressé* in both senses of this French term: upright *and* domesticated to defend and incarnate masculine honor as it is conceived in Guro milieux (Legendre 1978:65). In these ways, a person wearing a mask replaces the heroic figures of hunters and warriors that were deconstructed during the colonial moment. Like them, we can see that the masker is capable of putting himself in danger for the survival of society.

From the village to the city, however, a dancer's body endures a progressive transformation. In producing itself in contexts where spectators react differently to his talent, the masker resorts to other mechanisms for seducing his public that will lead to commissions for particular performances producing supplementary income. As a function of the location of production (the capital, an urban center, a village), masquerade takes on different significations for what may be the same person in all three

places. Through a masked dancer, a coming and going is created between town and village and vice-versa. Environments (urban and rural) and time frames (present, past, and future) lose their fixed contours and interpenetrate, melting into each other and refusing arbitrary definitions that tend to imagine them as impermeable and different. As Homi Bhaba puts it,

the work of culture demands an encounter with the "new" that is not inscribed in the continuum of past to present. It creates a new sense as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such an art is not limited to recalling the past as a social cause or historical precedent; it renews the past and reconfigures it as an "interstitial" contingency that innovates and interrupts performance of the present. The "past-present" becomes an aspect of necessity and not of a nostalgia for life (2007:38).

Most money garnered through performances in town and for tourists returns to the village. This cash flow brings with it other results: various material goods come in the form of gifts (clothing, audio-visual equipment, cell phones, etc.) but also, with regard to the physical training of dancers, through body practices sometimes learned in nightclubs, and sometimes borrowed from other dances or disciplines (theater, sports) that one finds reconfigured when the masks appear in the village. The person wearing a mask that has been produced in the city sees his prestige mount in the village because his economic power has increased and because he can give material goods to his family.



6 Gyela dancing in Mamnigui. 1994.

7 Gban performing in Tibeita. 1999.



Through his contact with urban modernity, he possesses a cosmopolitan dimension in the sense that, through the mediation of his person that has come into contact with what others can only imagine, he gives implicit access to such otherness (Lame 1996: 31-32). On the other hand, in urban settings he participates in the marginalizing phenomena of tourist diversions (in hotels and vacation camps), local ones (most often in the neighborhood where he has joined other Guro), or, more lucrative yet, artistic activities (in theaters and performance halls).

#### MASKS IN THE VILLAGE SETTING

Let us return to the village to better understand the environment in which masked performances take place, on which occasions they do so, and under what conditions. Villages in the region of Zuenoula are inhabited by Northern Guro as opposed to those generally called “southern,” living on the other side of the Red Bandama River (also called the Marahoué).<sup>4</sup> From the period of French colonization to today, many villages have been resettled along major roads to simplify their surveillance and control. The French administration also installed chiefs in such villages, but Northern Guro society remains profoundly acephalic—without chiefs but with a council of elders attending to important matters (Fischer 2008:30). Even now, however, a governmental chief without much effective authority is designated to lead villages for which he is the administrative spokesperson.

Many different masks exist among Northern Guro. They all come from the world of men; women care for a few masks of fiber or cloth within their association, but these are marginal activities. For each type of mask there is a name and particular stylistic criteria, most of the time visible in the face of the carved wooden mask (although a few may be made from fiber, cloth, or parts of plants and animals). The Guro masks so appreciated in the Western art market have not disappeared from local use. On the contrary, these have been found since the 1950s, and other models have been created that valorize new and more audacious

dances, made possible by the liberty of movement accorded to those wearing masks.

Two major categories of masks are produced in Northern Guro rural milieux. Both are important in their social and religious implications. Details of their differences and their particular characteristics are indispensable to an understanding of the role of the person wearing them who moves between village and city.

1. *Masks managed by artistic associations*: Called *zrangyeminu*—literally, “the people who ‘strike’ the engagement”—artistic associations are responsible for entertainment activities under the direction of a president (Fig. 5). They manage performances of several sorts of relatively minor masks, of which the best known are Gyela lu Zauli (Fig. 2), Flali (Figs. 1, 4), Gyela (Fig. 6), and Gban (Fig. 7). They assemble men who participate in the appearance of masks as organizers, assistants, dancers, singers and instrumentalists. Women are sometimes involved, but their interventions are fairly rare.

*Zrangyeminu* play an important role in funeral activities when the family of the deceased wishes to celebrate a parent’s departure and integration into the ancestral world. At such times, families that possess sufficient financial resources and wish to promote the prestige of their lineage contact artistic associations in different villages to commission performances. Villagers appreciate appearances of the same type of a mask, such as Gyela lu Zauli, from two different villages in competition. The winner brings honor not only to its village but also to the person of the dancer, who acquires a “cult of personality.”

A man seeking such fame will improve his physical condition through intense training, often practicing with musicians. Among Northern Guro, success of this sort makes a dancer vulnerable to the jealous attacks of sorcerers; indeed Guro feel that rigorous practice and the fame and reputation that follow make him a particularly attractive victim for a sorcerer. Talented musicians are similarly subject to attack by sorcerers, especially solo drummers, whose celebrity is increased by the success that African



(both pages, left-right)

8 Altar (yo ban ta fè) of the Djo mask in Bangofla. 1996.

9 Zamble during competition for funerals in Gonhounfla. 1997.

10 Gu in Bangofla. 1997.

11 Zauli in Mamnigui. 1994.



percussionists in general and *jembe* drummers in particular have received in the West in recent years (Bouttiaux 2006:55–60).

2. *Masks managed by lineage chiefs:* Certain lineages are responsible for the cults of supernatural beings, most often through an ancient pact between their ancestors and a nature spirit. Shrines are created to concentrate the active powers of such spirits when they are summoned by ritual leaders, who are also lineage chiefs. For example, an altar called *yo ban ta fè* ('the thing upon which one sacrifices to the spirit') is a collection of diverse substances and the results of sacrifices (feathers, blood, offerings of food, and kola nuts chewed up and expectorated on the shrine to honor a spirit) clustered around an object given by or left from the first encounter between an ancestor and the spirit (Fig. 8). Such a shrine becomes a place where one can have ready contact with the ancestors, who are themselves understood as supernatural agents (Boyer 2001:225). One needs only name the ancestors for them to join their powers to what I have called a "spiritual concentration" generally known as *yo*, through which natural forces are blended with ancestral presence (Fischer 2008:77, Bouttiaux 2004:76–85). "Rooted in the earth of the village, [such altars] are inscribed as traces of the achievement of the slow process of transformation of the dead to become ancestral powers" (Breton 2006:32).

Spirits associated with such cults sometimes demand to be represented through masks, and even in some cases to become incorporated into the very persons of those wearing them. Zamble (Fig. 9), Gu (Fig. 10), Zauli (Fig. 11), Djo (Fig. 12), Mbolli (Fig. 13), and Gyè (Fig. 14) are among the supernatural forces associated with lineage masks encountered most frequently among Northern Guro. These powers, which are essentially active through the altars where they are invited through sacrifices and libations, can be transferred as well to masks during performances. They are found in a number of villages through

alliances and allegiances among lineages. Dealings with spirits whose powers are difficult to control, despite relative "domestication" by and for men, transform the dancing of the masks of this second category into a dangerous practice, even though the purification, propitiation, and countering of sorcery they afford benefit society. Risks taken in this way flatter the egos of dancers and make them admirable in the eyes of spectators as were the Guro warriors and hunters of long ago. Playing against limits only recognized when they have been surpassed tempts men, who in this manner put their protective amulets and their own supernatural powers to the test (cf. Foucault 1994:238–39).

Dance practices associated with this sort of mask are usually accompanied by food proscriptions, medicinal prescriptions, and a variety of privations and psychological preparations. For the Northern Guro public that valorizes risky behavior of this sort, notably in the perception of a daring masculine ethos, such an environment of protections renders a performance the more interesting for being so perilous.

Contrary to artistic association masks, where the dancer's personality is of the utmost importance, he has a more pronounced freedom of expression, and his technical virtuosity is fully brought to bear, the lineage masks require controlled mastery. Sequences of stereotyped steps are executed with the aid of an assistant, who always follows the performer, holding a part of his costume. The masker, who is subject to strict rules and control of his smallest movements, is seized by a spirit that takes possession of his body. Nonetheless, these masks, too, or rather those who wear them, participate in dance competitions. In the choreographed performance, the *individual* is judged, not the spiritual entity that inhabits his body. On the contrary, what the masker lends the spirit is his experienced body, and in a competition among masks, only the ability to dance well is taken into account. The contest is between the techniques of two perform-



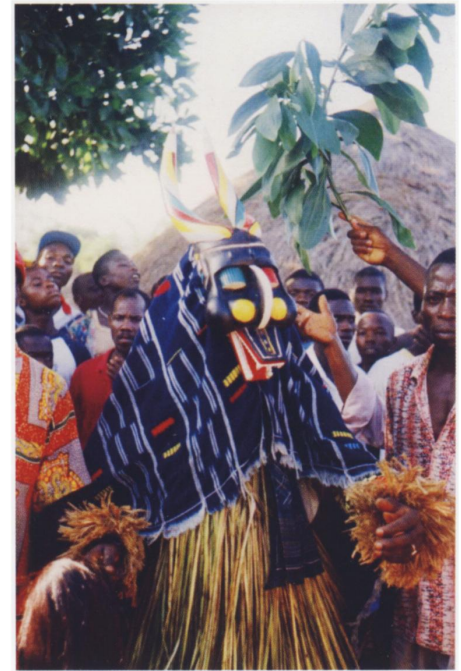
ers of the same type of mask, as opposed to certain cases of possession, when a transformed body is optimized and especially gifted in its performances because a spirit has taken it over. For example, when two Zamble from different villages confront each other, it is unthinkable to imagine that the spirit—identical in the two masks—might be measured unto itself. This supplementary argument confirms that, in the logic of performances and competitions, one is far from Dogon masks as Marcel Griaule defined them:

The mask has engulfed the man who is no longer anything but an anonymous vehicle; disorder results if the [performer's] face is perceived during an incident of the drama. The mask is a persona in all senses of that term; it is the mask, and not the person wearing it, who provokes exaltation and admiration, who contributes the most to the formation of esthetic sentiments that have such particular character in this population (1938:795).

#### THE SACREDNESS OF MASKS AND THE POWER OF GENRES

Northern Guro consider that masks are sacred, no matter which category they occupy. This sacredness manifests itself first and foremost through the rule that masks not being worn must be avoided, which women must respect. By no means are they to come into contact with the wooden faces when they are not being animated by men. Women even avoid staying in a place where masks are stored in trunks or sacks (and, in the old days, never entered the sacred forest where they were maintained). This is an implicit reminder of the powers of men, who are the only ones entitled to make use of these objects and whose active presence is the only guarantee of the masks' relatively inoffensive behavior. Women know that masks are dangerous for them and this knowledge should assure their prudent conduct. In this way, a man enjoys the possibility of ideal control; if the women around him bother him, he can pretend that he is carrying a *yo* in his bag. In effect, even the most harmless of masks holds the possibility of being invested with a spirit *yo* one day.

Masks from associations of artists are less important in the eyes of men, but since they remain a men's affair, they are not insignificant. Above all, they can intervene during funerals in celebrations that create circumstances favorable to praise, respect, and prestige for the deceased, who has left the world of the living. Wealthy families, especially, can organize competi-



tions among masks from several villages, and in this way demonstrate the family's privileged status. Funeral festivals provide opportunities for the distribution of drinks, food, and goods that comfort and surround the lineages providing such things with recognition and respect. In this same regard, a Northern Guro person living in Europe may return to the village to organize a "grand" funeral for one of his relatives. The important funds he invests on such an occasion reflects well upon the prestige that his kin will enjoy.

To express the more incidental role of these masks, Northern Guro say that they are women's diversions (*lé zran*). This basically means that women may join masked performances and sometimes even participate by executing a few steps in a single line around the dancing area (Fig. 15) or by approaching a mask at certain specified moments (Fig. 16).<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, if a mask is not being worn (always and necessarily by a man), by definition women are prohibited from seeing it. Such an assertion invalidates any well-defined opposition between sacred and profane. As Homi Bhaba (2007:33, 38, 40) has notably demonstrated concerning questions of identity (that is, relationships both with oneself and between oneself and the other), temporality, and tradition and modernity, social life plays itself out in the interstices, zones of confluence, and beyond boundaries as one leaves one social category to proceed toward another, and as notions of the interpenetration of concepts, persons, and acts subtly produce a new order of things.

There nonetheless exists a hierarchy in the sacredness of masks. This depends above all on their types but also upon supplementary prestige that the performer may bring to a mask. Such sacredness is especially perceived with lineage masks, all of which are associated with spirits. It would seem useful to explore the role of women in such a context, for their behavior progressively dif-



12 Djo in Bangofla. 1994.

13 Mboli in Bangofla. 1994.



fers between that shown to artists' masks and to masks implying supernatural intervention. The more sacred the mask and the greater the significance of rituals associated with it, the more women are distanced from their performance. Indeed, they are not even allowed to view the appearances of the terrible Gyè, whose very gaze can spell their doom (Fischer 2008:156–57).

Through their presence (or lack thereof) as spectators around the performance arena, women are the measure of the sacredness of masks, and through them one can deduce the degree of potentially destructive power that a mask possesses and can release. This also suggests the hold that men expect to maintain over the management of masks and the control of women. Excluded as soon as events are cloaked with ritual or political importance, women are tolerated as spectators of the more playful masks and, indeed, they are the principal inspiration for such performances. A number of masks used by artist associations bear the beauty of a smiling female face with eyes timidly lowered. Guro have no monopoly on this vision and perception of women: Pierre Bourdieu (2002:7) has recently averred that relations between the sexes vary very little across societies. His remarks concerning a reification of women can be applied to the Guro world without the least modification.

Masculine domination that constitutes women as symbolic objects of whom the “to be” (*esse*) is a “to be perceived” (*percipi*), has as its effect their placement in a permanent state of corporeal insecurity, or, better yet, symbolic dependence: women exist first and foremost through and for the gaze [regard] of others, that is, as welcoming, attractive, and available objects. One expects from them that they will be “feminine,” that is smiling, sympathetic, attentive, docile, discrete, kept, and even effaced (ibid, p. 94).

Masks whose titular spirit is a ritualist's responsibility display features that are much more aggressive, whether anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. Gu is the only mask among Northern Guro that is ambiguous, with a lovely female face but an improbable

and turbulent demeanor, and its largely unattractive dance hastens the likelihood of its disappearance before too long (Bouttiaux 2005, Fischer 2008:233).

The verdict of life or death for a woman who has broken the interdiction vis-à-vis contact with certain masks should be contextualized in contemporary village life. The anguish that the mere thought of seeing the redoubtable Gyè generates among women, even now, reveals the superiority that men continue to exercise over women through their manipulations of masks. The impressive character of transgressing this prohibition can engender pathogenic symptoms leading to profound mental disturbance. In the past, if anxiety and social pressures were not enough to cause the demise of the victim, elders and ritualists might add a final touch to bring about the woman's death, allegedly through poisoning. Even now, if the interdiction is broken, the person considered guilty will suffer enormous social pressure in her immediate surroundings, where illness and diverse misfortunes can provoke a deep, even fatal destabilization.

#### THE MASK WEARER, FROM ONE CATEGORY TO ANOTHER

As a function of his qualities, aptitudes, preferences, and sometimes the insistent requests that he receives, a dancer may wear several masks from both categories. More specifically, someone wearing a lineage mask may offer a spectacle—almost for the pure pleasure of it, if he is a virtuoso—with those of artists. The opposite is hardly possible, since access to masks associated with nature spirits is more difficult and above all, more hazardous. Ritualists seek intrepid and gifted men to present and validate their masks. They observe dancers and make them offers. They seek men who are strong and quick. The way that the body is fashioned by dance is the determinant at this stage: for a Zamble mask, especially, a man must be able to hold his legs in flexed positions for long periods, combined with extremely rapid movements and movements that suggest gliding and even levitation. Sometimes a dancer will be a member of a lineage possessing a mask, but this is far from



the rule; on the contrary, the necessity of finding someone with the physical capacities for this awkward task often requires looking outside the family. For his part, the masker finds himself in the ambiguous position of being frequented by important spiritual entities that reveal themselves to be both tempting and dangerous. The taste for risk—considered a masculine attribute—and access to supernatural powers are significant in this regard, for one cannot exist without the other.

In recent decades, Zamble performances have become so popular that the spirit has probably lost some of its earlier functions as a hunter of sorcerers, becoming one simply seeking magisterial valorization through dance.<sup>6</sup> In this way, innovations have been introduced to optimize the masker's technique through means similar to those of masks performed for entertainment. Zamble has been displaced to the boundary between the two categories, with his performance partaking of aspects of each; in the process, an audience directly participates in the mask's change of status. Zamble is unquestionably bound to a spirit and a *yo ban ta fè* shrine that a lineage chief uses for rituals. Zamble also offers more and more liberty to the man wearing its mask, for he is deemed an admirable soul who cannot resist the pleasures of fame and who may allow his face to be regularly perceived during performance (Fig. 17). Such a dancer *ought* to be seen, recognized, and named, but the very process of gaining such notoriety makes him vulnerable to sorcerers. As a consequence, he will only appear laden with amulets and various other protections, and he will be accompanied by assistants who hunt for magical traps and allies who will protect him. Before competitions, a dancer's mother may publicly offer the life of her son as a stake in the performance to come. Thus she completely exposes

him to the risk of death and of being wrapped in the shroud presented to him before he undertakes his exploit. "To affix oneself to Death, to trace the limitations of its power, reinforces the sense of identity of the one who dares accept such a challenge" (Le Breton 2000:17). Performances of this sort fascinate people as do those of a tightrope walker: aside from the beauty of the gesture, the moment is marked by the possibility of losing one's balance and plummeting to one's doom.

Other lineage masks continue to function by preserving as much as creating the wearer's anonymity. His identity, often known to everyone, is derived from a known secret about which one should remain silent. As A. Zempléni (1996:36) has suggested, "the law of silence prohibits not only the sharing of *knowledge* but its *enunciation* among those who hold the secret and those for whom it is destined." This phenomenon corresponds to the logic of masquerade arts often observed in societies with what Christopher Steiner (1990) has described as decentralized politics, which are more concerned with the need to conceal the sources of power than with making evident the strong personal authority of a king or a chief. The process downplays tensions among lineages by attributing power to supernatural forces.

Nevertheless, Gyè—the most sacred mask of the second category—sometimes escapes this tendency. Its performance is only produced by initiated men, and the very sight of the Gyè mask marks the basic transformation of boys. Women and children remain prudently hidden in their homes when Gyè is about. Among men who are, by definition, devoted to Gyè in the sense that the spirit's own power is an emanation of masculinity itself, it sometimes happens that the man wearing the mask becomes possessed by the spirit of Gyè, and takes off the mask.



14 Gyè mask. Inv. EO.1996.36.6  
PHOTO: JEAN MARC VANDYCK, ROYAL MUSEUM FOR CENTRAL AFRICA.

15 Women dancing around the dancing area during performance of a Gbaha mask at funerals in Poïsa. 1997.





16 Woman dancing with one of the masks (just like Gyela lu Zauli) of the Soléfè ensemble in Kouaffa. 1999.

17 Zamble with his assistant during competition for funerals in Gonhounfla. 1997.

(opposite, top-bottom)

18 Musicians of an artistic association accompanying masks performances in Banco slum, Abidjan. 1996.

19 Zauli mask. Zuenoula, February 13, 1999.



Dancers of entertainment masks face a double bind: to perform for spectators, displaying the artistic qualities for which they are renowned, and to escape the covetousness of sorcerers even as they risk attracting them. These objectives are manifested in their comportment: they balance audacity and prudence as they produce their choreography and reveal their technical prowess. They choose to lift up their masks to show their faces at propitious moments when they are surrounded by their assistants, always on the look-out for the spells and traps that envious persons with evil intentions may spring upon them. Such acts make them vulnerable even as they give them worth; they make their bodies, which have been transformed by dance and admiration, the choicest prey of sorcerers. Their engagement, however, proves to be less dangerous and more stimulating than that of lineage masks. They are not submitted to possession, which can be painful and difficult to control; they do not depend upon the solicitation of the powers of village societies; they are not obliged to take so many precautions in the form of potions, diets, and deprivations; and, finally, their assistants do not hold onto their costumes as though they were on leashes.

The rewards lie in the freedom of expression that this sort of performance offers. The dancers can create new steps, introduce performance elements they have seen elsewhere, and parody attitudes (especially of women) to produce a spectacle that combines talent with humor. Their bodies are submitted to less painful training, yet they must still correspond to masculine ideals of beauty and strength. The men's legs are the focus for many of the required aesthetic qualities. Certain dancers of Gyela ly Zauli cover their calves with several layers of cloth strips to appear larger under their tight clothing and so correspond to the Guro criteria of beauty for a well-turned leg. On the other hand, the more muscular one's calves appear, the more they are felt to guarantee a vigorous and agitated dance. Such innocent deception constitutes an implicit psychological preparation of the audience. These dancers *are* seductive!

Women are aware of the paradoxical nature of productions in which performers' resolutely masculine appearance is associated with typically feminine comportment. The dancers' conquests oblige admiration and envy, and yet they may instigate a sort of disdain on the part of other men. This gives rise to the phrase *lé zran*, 'the entertainment of women', which expresses the scorn attributed to the sphere of things that, if not insignificant, are certainly considered less significant than those associated with exclusively masculine activities, which are saturated with meaning.

In his treatise *The Passion to be An Other*, Pierre Legendre remarks that

one does not dialog with an effigy, one enjoys it through the gaze or by touching it. In this way, in the drama of the other dancing, what happens next depends upon the desire one has for this body-effigy, this fascinating body, and what, as a consequence, aroused as such all the subjects (2000:228).

For these reasons, many maskers associated with spiritual powers continue to perform playful masks, especially Gyela la Zauli. Celebrated, envied, and publicized, the mask and the man who wears it often leave the village to travel about Côte d'Ivoire in search of fame.

The control of village politics remains important nonetheless. Masks for entertainment, associated with the image and pleasure of women, are allowed on the national and international scenes, whereas those that are fundamentally useful and efficacious (notably the masks that hunt down sorcerers and thereby guarantee the physical and mental health of the village) remain under the control of the council of elders and the ritualists in strictly rural Guro settings. The powers of nature and the ancestors are in agreement to never travel beyond Guro borders.

#### WEARING MASKS FROM VILLAGE TO CITY

In the village, masked performers remain farmers above all. Family and friends do not think well of anyone who leaves his fields, even if such a defection permits him the leisure of perfecting his choreographic technique.

A masked performer isolated on the outskirts of a town or in an inner-city neighborhood like Banco—a veritable canker of a place in Abidjan where a Guro community exists in misery mixed with oft-deceived hope of international out-migration—can still find some financial compensation (Fig. 18). Such a man sets aside for his family and village whatever he earns by fortuitous performances or at tourist hotels, but whatever money he does earn hardly makes up for what he loses, for he rarely enjoys privileged status in such environments. As a consequence, a masker frequently travels from village to town to reconstruct in the one what he has lost in the other. Waiting for a performance contract that might launch him toward the West can leave the man in painful solitude.

Nothing replaces the esteem that such a man can gain as a virtuosic dancer in rural settings, where his capacity to perform several masks allows him to shine in entertainment activities but also, and more dangerously, in ways that consecrate a ritual engagement. The need for income remains essential in tempting him to seek his fortune in town. His village relatives have great hopes for someone who dares undertake urban or Western adventures. Departures are always associated with propitiatory divination séances. Tutelary spirits and ancestors are made votive promises in the form of sacrifices in thanks for their expected protection.

The years before the recent political turmoil in Côte d'Ivoire saw the appearance of a new kind of displacement. Certain dancers and percussionists, some of whom had lived in Europe, took the initiative to create dance stages for tourism in villages. These initiatives may have been appreciated by Western “students,” but they provoked local disappointment in ways similar to that provoked by visits of an anthropologist, as a matter of fact. Any presence of someone from the West, whose immense wealth is assumed, brings hope that daily life will be improved for village families, yet, in reality, this is not usually the case.

#### TRANSITIONAL SPACES AND TRANSFORMATIVE PLATFORMS

Between village and city, urban zones constitute spaces of transition where the majority population of the region is brought into contact and circumstances of work with other Ivoirians or foreigners. Zuenoula, as a seat of government for rural Guro, offers services sometimes difficult to find in other urban centers in the region and inaccessible in the villages. One finds health infrastructures (a hospital), telecommunications, educa-





20 Young boy of Gohitafla dressed as a politician for the photo. He especially expressed the phantasm of becoming minister. 1999.

tion (a secondary school), and finance (a bank), as well as public places known locally as *maquis*—a cross between a bar and a restaurant—shops, garages, a marketplace, and a post office. The population is mostly Ivoirian, and is composed of numerous ethnicities. Nonetheless, masks perform in such a semi-urban environment still considered “Guro.”

This is not a new phenomenon, and masked performers have long been recognized as dancing stars. In 1957, Georges Balandier could write of a Guinean masker on stilts, that

his exploits make young Kono dream as does one of our champion cyclists. He commercializes his performances, makes himself available to administrators on the lookout for local color for their official entertainments, travels hundreds of kilometers to attend the fairs of great cities. His photograph is avidly purchased. One can imagine that his disproportionately long legs have allowed him to take great steps along the path of degradation followed by all masked performers (1957:43).

On market days, at funerals, or at political events like the one introducing this paper, the appearance of masks is noted, accepted, and welcomed in Zuenoula. However, the most sacred among the masks are not expected to appear. From all evidence, the Gyè is excluded, for its appearance would require that women, children, and uninitiated men—and therefore anyone who is not Guro—hide in their homes; but also, at least theoretically, all lineage masks that see to lineage interests or specifically Guro interests are also excluded.

On February 13, 1999, a Zauli mask which would unequivocally be considered a lineage mask was present nonetheless (Fig. 19). The government minister who had come to present his political harangue was Guro, and to honor him, people from his village and others around it sent him a most prestigious mask. It was probably purposeful that Zauli-the-Ugly, as it is commonly known, should be chosen, for its insolence, impetuous temperament and audacious behavior are known to all. This nickname

facilitates a distinction between Gyela lu Zauli (Zauli, daughter of Gyela), for whom the feminine visage is sensitive and beautiful. Zauli-the-Ugly is the exact opposite of the celebrated Zamble: rather than the finesse, elegance, refinement, and virtue of the latter, one finds bluntness, churlishness, brutality, and filth.

Women were visibly impressed by the opportunity to approach this Zauli-the-Ugly in such an improbable context. As for the performer, he was overcome with the stifling heat and from time to time tried lifting the mask a bit to breathe more easily as entertainment masks do, but as only Zamble among lineage masks is permitted. Without a doubt, he must have invoked his spirits (*lé fè*) to ask that their powers protect and allow him to endure these unorthodox circumstances without baneful consequences. In watching this performance, I may have witnessed the seeds of change or a probable evolution. This exception might become “legal precedent,” in the sense that in future it could be taken as an argument justifying further departure from prescribed behavior.

For his part, the minister was caught up in ambiguous actions that day through the erratic deployment of marks of prestige and status. He wished to demonstrate his largesse by offering entertainment to the public, but he also wanted to be perceived as a man of authority. With other political personalities present who belonged to the same party but not the same Guro community, he had to show an air of indifference to the display of cultural manifestations for which the ethnic signature was evident.

More generally, any social, political, or economic pretense is suspect. Guro consider that such activities must be accompanied by sorcery. In the circumstances that he himself had created, Faustin Vlami Bi Dou could not surround himself only with friends, even though he was amidst a group of people who considered him to be dangerous. The arrogance which he showed could be seen as the affirmation of a man sure of his strengths, daring to take risks, and therefore too powerful to be attacked by sorcerers. To act with such insolent assurance is a common protective manoeuvre, for one must convince the invisible enemy that one is fearless. The minister also knew how much he had played upon his status to encourage such a manifestation of popular gaiety around his person. Everything about his behavior could be interpreted as a constant worried concern to avoid spells and occult reprisals, even as the minister engaged in a paradoxical redistribution of wealth combined with a logic of extortion (Bayart 1989:286–87).

#### THE DANCER AND THE POLITICIAN

The politician and the dancer do not play in the same court, but they pursue comparable goals: the loyalty of their public, recognition of their qualities, acquisition of a form of charisma, and proof of their efficacy. Both are led to make their talents manifest even as they wear masks—in literal and figurative senses. The first depends upon his mask to present a pleasant face that inspires confidence, while the second needs to hide his identity and the features deformed by effort. What differentiates them is the way they use their bodies. The dancer possesses perfect mastery and has a body that serves his purposes. The Ivoirian politician who calls upon performers has no other interest in the persons who animate the masks. He seeks an image that will

still impress the masses even as he may envy the success and charismatic potential of the artist. This envy is such that certain politicians do not seem to hesitate to extort and commit crimes against these persons who are so adored by the community. Even ritual murder for the ends of sorcery is sometimes attributed to them. This is how the assassination of Kwei bi Voli, still considered the most famous dancer of Gyela lu Zauli in Guro country, was interpreted in 1979 (Bouttiaux 2006:63).

For Guro boys, the men occupying these two roles provide models for their ambitions. To be a dancer in the village and a government minister in the city fuels their fantasies of better lives (Fig. 20). However, such a child's dream reveals that, in his urban migration, the dancer loses what is paradigmatic about a Guro masculine ethos: to be a hero capable of taking considerable risks by measuring himself against supernatural forces for the very panache and beauty of the gesture. In the city, the fact that he is a Guro man is hardly significant, and at best he becomes just one Ivoirian among so many others, and he must

concentrate on gaining paid performances. And yet for the dancer who has decided to settle in Abidjan, such performances rarely gain him enough money to recuperate his preferential status in the village.

In contrast, becoming a minister can transform a man into an important personality, successful at a national or even international level. Generally, the dancer who migrates to town does not come back wearing a suit and tie, driving a gleaming car. The politician, however, is marked by all those signs of success which can be analysed in terms of modernity because the West has put its mark on them: the West which definitively remains the inaccessible paradise, the Elsewhere where everything is possible.

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1 Zuenoula, an urban center and seat of the Département de Zuenoula, is located in Northern Guro country but is also home to people from many other parts of the country.

2 This is a type of Guro mask famous for the quality of its dances and for its performances linking technical proficiency with ludic dimensions. As opposed to the government minister presented here, who is Guro, Houphouët Boigny was Baule.

3 Likewise, Senufo painted textiles (Korhogo region) and the acrobatics of young Dan girls (Man region) are perceived as expressing a kind of "Ivoirity" that subsumes different populations under a national label, as opposed to the "Ivoirity" that divides and is based on the exclusion of one group of the population.

4 Differentiation between Northern and Southern Guro remains important, for the river represents a natural boundary beyond which a series of cultural facts are reversed: kinship systems ("Omaha" to the North, "Hawaian" to the South), naming (through the father or the mother), the appearance of masks (during the night of day), etc.

5 As Marcel Mauss (1999:381) noted for many societies, women's and men's dances are often diametrically opposed. For more details on the very codified participation of women in Northern Guro masked performances, see Bouttiaux 1999.

6 Anthropological literature sometimes notes Zambé as a hunter of sorcerers; see Deluz 1993:99. Such activities are no longer practised, aside from the fact

that the spiritual presence in the dancer's body may distance certain cowardly sorcerers. Paradoxically, however, the resolutely admirable nature of "star" dancers attracts agents of evil stalking prey that so excel yet are so difficult to trap, and therefore most worthy victims who will augment the sorcerers' occult powers.

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